

# The True Story of Andersonville Prison

## A Review

[Jett Rucker](#)

by James Madison Page and M. J. Haley. Digital Scanning, Inc., Scituate, Mass. 1999 [1908] 248 pp.

Rather like history in general, revisionism seems to be grouped into “waves” or “generations” that follow major wars. Thus, Harry Elmer Barnes led the first major wave of revisionism that seemed, at least for a time, to succeed in the aftermath of the First World War. Barnes was still a commanding figure in the wave that followed the Second World War, though this wave, ominously, seems at the present remove never to have attained as high a crest as the wave following the preceding world war did (and *not* for lack of “water”).

Revision of the histories of earlier wars, in America most notably the American Revolution and the War Between the States, continues apace, along with the I-was-there revisions following the numerous conflicts that have followed the Second World War right up to the present. What seems sometimes not appreciated in the present time is that contemporaneous waves of revisionism actually are to be noted following those earlier (pre-Barnes) conflicts, notably the War Between the States.

Perhaps the bulk of the revisionism following the War Between the States concerned the depredations of Abraham Lincoln’s administration on the civil rights of political opponents (especially newspaper publishers and political figures) in the states constituting “the Union” during that war. Thomas DiLorenzo’s *Lincoln Unmasked* and William Marvel’s *Mr. Lincoln Goes to War* are especially good accounts of this revisionism, but they are themselves too recent to be part of the postbellum wave itself. Another subject of that wave of revisionism, however, concerned the prisoner-of-war camps operated by the Confederacy—and the Union—and the one and only war-crimes trial conducted after the War, by the victor, of course, in Washington, D.C.

This book came out near the “tail” of the post-bellum wave, having been originally published in 1908. It was republished a number of times since then, most-recently as a digital reproduction in 1999 by Digital Scanning, Inc. of Scituate, Mass. A “digital reproduction” in this case is apparently an electronic resetting of the type, from scans of the original text. Beautifully clean, sharp type that nonetheless looks very much like the original typeface looks, and none of the fuzz and dropouts that plague reprints of legacy documents such as this one.

If the War between the States had ended when the Second World War ended in 1945, this book’s 1908 debut would have occurred in 1988, so it was rather “fresher” vis-à-vis its subject than today’s books revising the Second World War. Of course, unlike today’s books about the Second World War, this book was written by an eyewitness about his own experiences, at the notorious prisoner-of-war camp nicknamed “Andersonville” after the name of the train station, Anderson Station, Georgia, where prisoners got off the train and marched to the nearby camp. It was upon reading of this march from the train station to the camp that the first “reverse echo” of descriptions of German concentration camps came to me. Many of these echoes, eerie in their totality, were to strike me in the rest of the reading partly, I suppose, because I have made a lifelong study of Second World War concentration camps—and not just those established and operated by the Germans.

In the period between the 1865 end of the War between the States and the 1908 publication of this memoir, dozens of accounts by putative survivors of Andersonville and other Confederate POW camps were published and introduced into the public's "understanding" of what happened in and around these camps, and who (invariably the dastardly Confederates) might be assigned blame for the very real horrors that actually did occur in those times and places. The great bulk of this body of literature pandered to that taste which is to be found among members of every public for the sensational and the simple-to-believe, and at least some of them performed quite well the function that they were designed to perform—they made money, sympathy, and fame for their authors, many of whom had of course never set foot anywhere near a POW camp, nor for that matter worn a uniform.

It is this grossly fabricated, sensationalized, commercialized spate of tabloid histories primarily that Page revises, and he confronts a number of these accounts by name and author, quoting them at length, and pointing out where they are false and what the truth instead might be. This is what might be called "confrontative," or point-by-point revision, and particularly for a reader from outside contemporary times, as now we all are and will ever be, it is a far more-informative kind of revision than the kind that sets the record straight without reference to the crooked particulars of the record that it is straightening. Items of this description punctuate the account throughout, considerably illuminating and enlivening it.

James Madison Page is presented in the book as 2nd. Lieut., Company A, Sixth Michigan Cavalry, but if he had been that when captured on September 21, 1863, he would never have gotten near the camp, officially known as Camp Sumter to the Confederates, which was only for enlisted men. Page's commissioning occurred long after the war, perhaps just before his retirement—perhaps a promotion intended primarily to raise the amount of his pension. Page does not give his rank at the time of his capture, but it appears that it might have been corporal or sergeant, nor does he mention the exclusion of officers from Andersonville.

The narrative of Page's capture, transportation, and existence in Andersonville and before it a Virginia camp known as Belle Isle conform in general outline to other accounts of persons sharing his experience (of whom most survived and many told): the general deprivation of diversions, pleasures, and often enough, various necessities; the recurrent wildfires of rumors having mostly to do with prisoner exchanges, which actually occurred sporadically particularly early in the war; the monstrous uncertainties that plague any and every captive of hostiles in all history. But one element stands out conspicuously in Page's story that is absent from most of its competitors: the compassion, even occasional caring, if not respect, evidenced by Confederate soldiers and guards for the Union soldiers for each of whom, they all knew, there was at least one Confederate prisoner in the hands of Union captors.

Page's enumeration of countless minor considerations, mercies, even interventions in support of peace, order, even occasionally comfort for the prisoners are compelling in the specificity of the details with which they are recounted. The author occasionally digresses into generalized expiations about the typical and usual disposition and temper of the Southern soldier, and his terms occasionally verge on the rhapsodic. This view of his captivity and captors, of course, clashes with the typical review presented by any former inmate who at all times when crafting his memoir must be conscious that some renditions of events will engender greater interest and sympathy for the author than other renditions. Every eyewitness must combat or, in other cases, exploit this factor in rendering the sort of account that serves whatever his purposes might be in rendering it. Exactly what purposes Page might be serving

other than the “truth and justice” mentioned on the back cover of the paperback seem difficult to conjure.

Aside from the march from the train station to the camp, a number of other aspects of Part I, “Andersonville: The Prisoners and Their Keeper” reminded me of accounts of German concentration camps. Of these, the one that most stands out is the “poisoned vaccine” for smallpox that was administered for a time during Page’s term. The smallpox intended to be controlled actually had broken out, according to Page’s observation. It was effectively controlled, Page continues, by the prompt removal and quarantining of every affected inmate, and by the administration of a very likely crude vaccine to inmates who could not show evidence of having already been inoculated. Among those vaccinated, there was a notable number of fatal reactions, not altogether unexpected even with the best pharmaceutical technology and medical care available at the time, to say nothing of the pertinent standards prevailing at Andersonville.

Inevitably, the rumor got about that this vaccine was deliberately poisoned so as to kill inmates. This account reminded me of the tale ruling the mainstream history of today that the Germans adapted the fumigant Zyklon-B, brought into their camps and used in great quantities for disinfestation purposes, to the killing of inmates. Some or all of the vaccine used at Andersonville may have been lethal, and this might have been inadvertent, negligent, or even deliberate; deaths positively did ensue from its use. Some of the Zyklon-B used in the concentration camps may have resulted in the death of inmates; indeed, fatal accidents in the use of Zyklon-B for its designed purpose were at all times a real possibility. There may even have been enclosures or structures intended to accommodate homicidal use of the fumigant. But at Auschwitz as at Andersonville, the evidence for the allegations becomes progressively scander as the allegations become progressively more brutal and intentionally homicidal.

It seems that somehow, Sergeant (or whatever his rank was) Page had a good deal of direct contact and actual dealings with Captain Wirz. While an actual friendship could hardly have grown up between commandant and inmate, Page claims a notably cordial working relationship between the two soldiers and describes it in detail on a number of significant and specific occasions. In this period, Page acquired an in-depth understanding of Wirz’s character, interests, and even foibles that undoubtedly informed his view of the subsequent tribunal proceedings against him.



*Rudolf Höss, Commandant of Auschwitz. Photo is in the public domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

Part II of this book, “Henry Wirz: The Man and His Trial” contains the bulk of the undeniable atrocities of the story, and most of these involve the maladministration of a simulacrum of “justice” at the military tribunal assembled for Wirz’s conviction and his subsequent hanging in October 1865. This final quarter or so of the book, with the adduction of the “evidence” in the case, its verdict, its sentence, and the carrying out of the sentence, reminded me of the case of Rudolf Höss, commandant of the Auschwitz camp, in 1946-47 before a Polish tribunal, which produced the same sentence and end result. While I have not yet discovered a (translated) transcript of the Höss proceedings, I have studied at length reports of the “trials” (they were all military tribunals, which should in no way be mistaken for legitimate, much less fair, trials beyond their similarity of producing verdicts and sentences) held in Nuremberg, Dachau, and other places in the western zones of occupied Germany. It was of the details of these chiefly American-conducted proceedings that the details of Wirz’s proceeding most strikingly reminded me; indeed, Wirz’s proceeding also was entirely American.

Many of the defendants (referred to as “accused”) at Dachau and like venues were hampered by language barriers from understanding the proceedings of which they were the subject, and were similarly hampered in their ability to testify and respond to questioning in court (most of their testimony was elicited in pre-trial sessions with interrogators and translators). Wirz attended his proceedings and obviously understood what was being said at all times, but he seems not to have testified at all. In fact, Wirz was suffering from war wounds<sup>[\*]</sup> at the time, and often lay on a couch as he observed the proceedings.

The author never states explicitly that he was present for any, much less all, of the 73 consecutive days of the proceeding, but it seems very clear that he was. He wanted, in fact, to be called as a witness to testify to the many things he knew and had seen concerning the acts of the accused, but out of all the dozens like him, less than twelve witnesses were called, each of these quite evidently carefully vetted, scripted, and rehearsed, a circumstance very much in evidence and much noted by Joseph Halow in his moving book, *Innocent at Dachau*.

The mendacity of all the witnesses against Wirz were borne out not only by many telltale inconsistencies and unlikelihoods in their testimonies but as well by revelations uncovered long after the tribunal (and the execution of its innocent subject), disclosing typically that the very identities of the witnesses had been falsified, and the evidence as to their whereabouts during the times they claimed to have observed Major Wirz’s acts most dubious.

The charges against Wirz bore a general resemblance to the charges against accuseds at Dachau: that said accused on such-and-such a date did, with malice aforethought, and so on, kill, strike, injure so-and-so, a prisoner in his charge, with one consistent exception that seems unbelievable in a present-day reading: *no name of any victim was ever specified!* Major Wirz was accused of a total of 13 single killings to which “witnesses” testified, on various dates including dates on which Wirz was documentably far away from Andersonville on furlough, but in every case, it was stated that the name of the victim was *stated* to be unknown. Wirz was hanged for killing—typically shooting—nobodies, an allegation the author stated his inclination to reject even had real, dead Andersonville inmates been named as victims.

One aspect of Wirz’s handling during and especially after the trial had potentially momentous implications, but these in fact never arose, evidently from Wirz’s heroic refusal to lie. Page carefully

documents an initiative that came apparently from the office of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton to commute Wirz's death sentence on the condition that he give evidence implicating former Confederate President Jefferson Davis in a plan to starve or otherwise kill prisoners of war in his custody. It's impossible to know, of course, whether Stanton would have made good on his offer of clemency, but Wirz never gave any such evidence, and he swung from the end of a rope. Stanton's character as presented in the final chapter of the book inclines one to presume that Wirz might have met the same end even if he had given the desired "evidence."

A consistent theme, evidently goal, of the prosecutions at Nuremberg, Dachau and elsewhere seems to have been to implicate Himmler, Hitler, and other very-senior Nazis in various programs of atrocity, in particular genocides against Jews and other targeted racial groups. Höss implicates Himmler rather unconvincingly in his memoirs as having ordered him to exterminate concentration-camp inmates systematically and in large numbers, and through hearsay (quoting Himmler's spoken words), he attempts to implicate Hitler as the source of the orders. And Höss also swung from a rope, though perhaps somewhat later than he might have had he not been quite so prolific while being held in a Polish prison.

In this, the cases of Höss and Wirz would seem to diverge, but this divergence might hinge to some extent on other divergences. Höss's family had been threatened initially by British soldiers in order to find Höss himself, and his family appeared to continue to be subject to mistreatment. No such possibility appears in Page's account of Wirz's case. In fact, the movements of Mrs. Wirz and their children from place to place before and during his proceeding give every appearance of their being entirely free even of surveillance. Likewise, Höss in Polish captivity wrote of being tortured by the British while he was in their custody, and had he not been in Polish custody, he might have written of similar treatment at their hands. As it was, he reported a significant amount of mistreatment and intense neglect. Page gives no indication whatsoever that Wirz was tortured at any point. In fact, in comparison with the later period, the dealings of the Nineteenth Century impart an impression of a significantly more-civilized time in general.

Many hapless inquirers into the particulars of genocides committed during the Second World War have expressed the opinion that German depredations formed but one of a long and horrible series of genocides going far back into antiquity and extending later into times long after the end of the war. For this, they have been branded "Holocaust deniers" by opponents asserting that at least some of Germany's supposed genocidal aims somehow constituted unique novelties in the annals of human behavior.

Readers of *The True Story of Andersonville Prison* will be tempted, if they react to it the way I did, to see the postwar prosecutions in Germany, Poland and later in Israel as but more of a continuum reaching back into human history as far back as tribunals and drumhead courts have been contrived to extend the propaganda value of retributive killings by the victors of wars. Persons so influenced, however, would do well to heed the fate of those reaching a similar conclusion regarding wartime deaths of noncombatants at the hands of the losers: pronouncing continuities in history can still, 65 years after the end of the war, get you in big trouble, even jail in a number of "advanced" western countries.

---

**Sources:**

- Dilorenzo, Thomas. *Lincoln Unmasked*. Three Rivers Press, New York, 2006.
- Halow, Joseph. *Innocent at Dachau*. Legion for the Survival of Freedom, Costa Mesa, Cal., 1993.
- Höss, Rudolf. *Commandant of Auschwitz*. Phoenix Press, London, 2000.
- Marshall, John A. *America's Bastilles*. Thomas W. Hartley, Philadelphia, 1869.
- Marvel, William. *Mr. Lincoln Goes to War*. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 2006

[\*] It was as a consequence of his combat wounds that Captain Wirz was transferred from front-line duties to his post as commandant of the interior of Camp Sumter.

<b>Author(s):</b>	<a href="#">Jett Rucker</a>
<b>Title:</b>	The True Story of Andersonville Prison
<b>Sources:</b>	<i>Inconvenient History</i> , 2(2) (2010)
<b>Dates:</b>	published: 2010-07-01, first posted: 2014-02-14 00:00:00

<http://inconvenienthistory.com/2/2/3112>